

The cold, the muck, the excrement falling from the sky, none of it bothers her. Helen's crazy about birds. Up at 4:30, outside in the bone-chilling dawn with a gathering of strangers, all for the return of the birds. The migration—it's a big deal around here. This time of year, what else is there, but puddles, dripping clouds, and dead leaves stuck to the bottom of one's shoes. But with them here, wherever you look, there's a fly-away or a murmuration. And real high-octane excitement in the marshes and flooded rice fields—all that quacking, flapping, and splashing.

Gray Lodge Wildlife Area—the pinnacle of bird-watching. Here we're parked. Next to us, an Arctic blast blows whitecaps on the slough. Helen jumps out to join the others. No one seems to mind the cold—none of the gawking strangers, not my wife, not even the waterfowl themselves seem bothered. So, I turn up my collar and step out.

Helen tugs my sleeve and exclaims with her perennial bubbiness, “Oh, look! Get out your glasses! See that bird at the far shore with the brilliant green under its wing and on its head? A green-winged teal!”

I search in vain with my binoculars. “Green-winged teal, eh? And yet it doesn't turn its head when called? Are you sure?”

Our leader saves me from her spicy retort by proclaiming, “Okay everyone, let's head over to the viewing platform!”

I hesitate. Commit myself to the frigid wilderness with these strangers? But she pulls my hand, until I'm following the obedient crowd down the muddy trail.

Our leader, whose name I've forgotten, stops at an opening in the bushes overlooking a new perspective of the wetland. “Okay! Over here on this closest island. See? By the broken branch. The bittern!”

We're quiet as we search. Helen and I have been here before, so we know where it is. It's at the same spot every year, hidden in the rushes by the water's edge, but it's impossible to see until the bird moves. Then one of the reeds comes alive, moves away from the other stalks, and disappears again.

"I see it!" "That is incredible!" "Wow!"

Our leader delights at our admiration. When the group moves in the direction of the viewing platform, we stay behind and sit on a weathered bench under a massive live oak. River otters live on the same island, but since this is a birding excursion, no one's interested except Helen and me. So, we sit and wait. The surrounding trees break the wind and, in the calm, a newly-arrived sun warms us. My eyelids grow heavy.

"Here, lie down. Put your head on my lap."

I do. She stokes my brow and continues to identify birds, perhaps even the otters. I can't be sure, because her words slip away and only the comforting tone remains.

Her certitude and consolation seep into my sleep. For when my dream brings me into a world that's ablaze, as it was last November, I'm calm and fortified. The buildings burn with flames reaching to impossible heights. They're giant Yosemite Firefalls gone wrong—tumbling *up* into the heavens. The street is a deep gouge in the conflagration. Then like a benevolent hand rescuing me, Wind lifts me high, well above the smoke. From here I see an island of tranquility in the distant schoolyard, where three boys kick a ball amongst themselves. An eagle flies past, and I greet it. The bird glides nearby and returns my greeting.

"Eagle, can you please use your powerful vision to tell me who those boys are?"

It glances in their direction, but stares at my pocket. “I’m absolutely starved. If you could possibly feed me a fish, it would be so much easier to see them.”

Something squirms in my pocket. I reach in, pull out a fat trout, and show it to the bird. Barely looking at the boys, it declares, “Why those are your dear childhood friends—Joey, Stevey, and Mikey.” At that, I toss the fish. The eagle catches it midair and flies away. Before the November fire, they were men of my age, but here in this world of my own making, they’re boys again—and they’re alive.

I order Wind to deliver me to them, but offended by my arrogance, instead it blows me to the ground in front of our fiery house. To my amazement, I see my wife in the second-story bedroom window, but unlike last November, I don’t rush into the house to save her. Helen is delivering this vision, so I wait outside to see what comes of it. After the house is almost totally consumed and only the frame remains burning, my unharmed wife, wearing a spotlessly pure white gown, steps from the wreckage. I run towards her, hold her tightly, and tell her never to leave me.

“Of course, I’ll never go,” she answers.

But she does.

A knock. “Dad?”

The images vanish and I open my eyes. The room’s unfamiliar. I’m in a twin bed. I lift my arms to examine them. In my dreams, they’re strong and unblemished, but now, even in this dim light, I see they’re covered with burn scars. I clench my teeth when I realize I’m truly awake and Helen’s gone.

Another knock. “Dad, are you awake?”

The room's filled with cardboard boxes and plastic storage bins. I remember now. My daughter Ruth asked me to spend the night with her and her husband, so that, together we can scatter Helen's ashes into the bay.

The door opens and Ruth peeks in. "How you doing this morning?"

"Good."

"The ebb tide flows for the next hour. Robbie's already at the dock preparing for launch. Think you can be ready in 30 minutes?"

Two hours later, the current has carried our sailboat far from shore. Robbie steers. His face is stony. His steely eyes, avoiding my direction, search for landmarks in the mist.

Likewise, I avoid his. Ruth's hands fidget. She's been glancing furtively between her husband and me, not because of my hostility towards him, but because the time to empty Helen's ashes into the dark abyss is long past. Yet, stubbornly I hold onto the urn.

When Ruth was girl, she was my pixie with her grandfather's freckles and her mother's upturned nose and my own copper-colored hair. But during her teen years—filled with the urgency of college preparations and all the drama of boy infatuations and girlfriend fights, stuff only Helen could cope with—I was nudged into the background. If that weren't bad enough, then came her marriage to Robbie. After which, I was shoved aside and forgotten along with the rest of her dusty childhood things.

I set my jaw. I won't give up my wife's ashes and I won't defend my actions to a daughter who's forgotten me for so long. But my defiance crumbles before her. My only defense is to ramble. I stammer and hesitate as I explain to her the kind of person her mother was—as though

she doesn't know. I remember the good times— so many that I can't stop talking about the moments, the years, and the decades with her. Time stands still and I think only of the two of us. Then too quickly, it ends. There's no more to tell and I'm quiet.

My daughter bursts into tears and blubbers. I can't understand her, but listen anyway. The boat wanders aimlessly as Ruth chokes, gasps, and wails. Finally, she takes a deep breath, shudders, then all is silent. The only sound comes from a distant barge sputtering in the fog towards the Oakland Harbor.

Am I supposed to comfort my daughter or is that her husband's job? I blow out my cheeks and curse the world for taking Helen away. She'd know what to do. But before my fussing gets out of control, Robbie holds a glass out to me. I stare at the offering. As is my custom with Robbie, I want to refuse anything from him—his opinions, his stories, his accomplishments, even this. But to my surprise, I take the glass and mumble my thanks.

“To Helen,” he offers. We clink our glasses—grudgingly me, too.

He talks about her. Normally I ignore him, but this time, he has my attention. Ruth and I examine the hull, as though the cracked wood could make us understand why she disappeared. My daughter picks up a flake of paint and grinds it into her palm. When he's finished talking, she blows it into the wind. Why did she do that? To check wind direction or to nudge me into casting away the ashes and to end this trip? I hold the urn tightly to my chest. I won't let it go.

Our glasses empty. No words spoken. The breeze freshens. The tide ripples in. The fog clears away. I prepare myself for the return trip to the City by hunkering down under the jib out of the way, while Ruth and Robbie manage the sail. What to look forward to once we make landfall?

Without Helen, not much. I batten down my expectations, bare my teeth for a grim outlook. They'll likely drop me off at my car. After that, a desolate landscape outlines my future.

We land and jump onto the dock. While Robbie secures the vessel, Ruth tries to tell me something, but her words are caught by sobs. She collapses onto a wet rock, crying and hiding her face in her hands. I sit on my haunches next to her.

It's been so long I've forgotten that I'm the only one who can approach my daughter when she cries. When she was a girl and upset, I would sit by her until her tears dried. But that was so long ago—before Robbie. I've always found her tears noble, a way of giving homage to life's tragedies. I sit close to her so that I can share the moment as she sanctifies this one.

While Robbie sits in the truck cab backing the trailer towards the boat, a gust blows the vessel crosswise, banging it against the pier. I jump up and grab a line to align the boat to the ramp.

The sailboat's on the trailer. It's time to leave. Robbie's in the driver's seat waiting. Ruth stands and walks towards me. As she nears me, the sun breaks through the clouds, spotlighting her freckles and the chestnut color in her hair. I smile at my pixie.

“We want you to stay with us.” She says in a soft tone, “it's lonely without Mom.”

Confused by this sudden turn of events, I look to Robbie, but he turns away, as though this is not his discussion.

“Well—I'd like that—very much,” I respond. My hands wring restlessly. Do I hold her to show my gratitude? Is she too grown up for that? Is it too forward of me? Why couldn't Helen be

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here to point the way? But my daughter quiets my awkwardness by embracing me. Robbie, with grim determination, jumps out of the truck and thumps me on the shoulder.

Until that moment, I never realized how much she sounds like her mother, with the same certitude and—to my relief—the very same comfort.